

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

NUM. 12:1 And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman.

2 And they said, Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the LORD heard *it*.

3 (Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.)

4 And the LORD spake suddenly unto Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam, Come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congregation. And they three came out.

5 And the LORD came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood *in* the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth.

6 And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, / the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, *and* will speak unto him in a dream.

7 My servant Moses *is* not so, who *is* faithful in all mine house.

8 With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak

against my servant Moses?

9 And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed.

10 And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam *became* leprous, *white* as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, *she was* leprous.

11 And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned.

12 Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb.

13 And Moses cried unto the LORD, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee.

14 And the LORD said unto Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days? let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in *again*.

15 And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days: and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in *again*.

16 And afterward the people removed from Hazeroth, and pitched in the wilderness of Paran.

NOTES

Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses

Lesson Text: Numbers 12:1-16

Related Scriptures: Numbers 5:1-4; II Chronicles 26:16-21;
Deuteronomy 34:5-12; Exodus 33:12-23; Hebrews 3:1-6

TIME: 1444 B.C.

PLACE: Desert of Paran

GOLDEN TEXT—"If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream" (Numbers 12:6).

Lesson Exposition

AARON AND MIRIAM SPEAK AGAINST MOSES—Num. 12:1-9

Ethnic issues (Num. 12:1). As the Israelites traveled through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, Moses endured several challenges to his authority. There were many in the Israelite camp who at various times rebelled against his leadership. Perhaps the most significant challenge, however, came from his own brother and sister.

At some point after the plague involving the quail (11:31-35), Miriam and Aaron began to resent Moses. Initially, the reason stated for this resentment had to do with the Ethiopian ethnicity of Moses' wife.

Ethiopia, also referred to as the land of Cush, was located to the south of Egypt. Some forty years before this time, Moses' had married Zipporah, who is identified as a Midianite (cf. Ex. 2:16-22). Some have argued that Midian and Cush were two names for the same place and Zipporah is the one referred to in Numbers 12:1. Most

scholars suggest it is more likely that Zipporah had died and Moses had married an Ethiopian woman.

The fact that Miriam and Aaron opposed Moses is significant for several reasons. First, they were his sister and brother. Second, and more important, their opposition meant that both the prophetic and priestly offices were now seeking to undermine Moses.

Miriam is mentioned as a prophetess among the women (cf. Ex. 15:20), while Aaron was appointed by God to be the high priest of Israel (cf. 28:1). Prophet and priest thus allied themselves against God's appointed mediator over Israel. Miriam's prominence and the judgment she subsequently suffered indicate that she was the instigator who influenced her brother Aaron to join her in bringing their grievance.

Miriam and Aaron's jealousy (Num. 12:2-3). Although Miriam and Aaron grumbled against Moses' Ethiopian wife, they revealed the jealousy within their own hearts by asking

their real question: Did God speak only through Moses? The implication here is that God also spoke through them, prophetess and priest, just the same. Why, then, did Moses reserve such great authority for himself? They resented the closeness of the relationship Moses had with God and the authority God had given him as Israel's foremost leader.

They clearly did not like the fact that God spoke and ruled primarily through their younger brother. In their minds, Moses did not qualify for such a leadership role any more than they did. Perhaps they wished to imply that Moses was an authoritarian who had allowed his ego to get out of control and run wild.

The only thing out of control in this situation was the jealousy that fueled Miriam and Aaron's complaint. In a parenthetical note, verse 3 states that Moses was the meekest man on earth. Meekness in this instance is closely associated with humility, meaning that Moses was the exact opposite of how his sister and brother portrayed him.

God calls Moses, Miriam, and Aaron (Num. 12:4-5). God wasted no time in getting involved in this dispute. Very suddenly, He called Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to meet Him at the tabernacle, or tent of meeting, where His presence was manifested. God was not going to tolerate any more of the backbiting against Moses by his sister and brother.

After Moses, Miriam, and Aaron gathered at the tabernacle, God descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance. There He called Miriam and Aaron to come and appear before Him.

The faithfulness of Moses (Num. 12:6-7). There was no mistaking who was speaking to Miriam and Aaron as God told them to hear His words.

Normally when God spoke, He did so through Moses. In this instance, however, He addressed the rebellious prophetess and priest directly.

God did not deny that He spoke with and through prophets, but He typically did so by visions and dreams. Moses, on the other hand, was unique.

The commendation that Moses was "faithful in all mine house" (vs. 7) does not mean he was perfect. In fact, as we previously learned in Numbers 11, he at times voiced his own displeasure with God. However, Moses was faithful in what God called him to do. Though he stumbled and sinned occasionally, the consistent pattern of his life was to obey the Lord.

God's unique relationship with Moses (Num. 12:8-9). When God spoke to Moses, He did not do so through visions and dreams. Instead, He spoke to him directly. He did not use riddles or figurative speech but conversed clearly with him. God and Moses spoke to one another in a way that showed very close communion and fellowship.

God then asked Miriam and Aaron very pointedly why, knowing He spoke directly to Moses, they were not afraid to speak against him.

MOSES INTERCEDES FOR MIRIAM—Num. 12:10-16

Miriam contracts leprosy (Num. 12:10). The setting just described above is that of a courtroom, where the plaintiffs, defendant, and judge are assembled. The Judge had already heard the plaintiffs' case against the defendant and called all parties together.

The case against Moses, spurious as it was to begin with, was dismissed entirely when the Judge left the courtroom, but His ruling against the plaintiffs became clear as Miriam instantly became leprous.

Aaron pleads with Moses for Miriam (Num. 12:11-12). Aaron immediately turned to Moses and asked him not to punish Miriam and him for their foolishness. He admitted that they had sinned and pleaded for mercy. Moses, of course, had nothing to do with Miriam's punishment; it was inflicted by God. However, this divine judgment effectively reinforced to Aaron that Moses was God's chosen servant, and he received the message loud and clear.

The horror Aaron felt as he saw his sister afflicted with such a terrible disease was expressed quite vividly as he compared her to a stillborn child who comes out of his mother's womb with his flesh half-eaten.

Moses' prayer and God's answer (Num. 12:13-14). After Aaron turned to Moses in desperation and repentance, Moses immediately went to God with the same sense of desperation as Aaron.

Moses' prayer for Miriam shows that he did not allow feelings of anger or bitterness toward her to dominate his thoughts or attitude. In fact, there is no indication from the text at all that Moses ever harbored any resentment toward Miriam or Aaron.

God responded to Moses' intercessory prayer for Miriam by stating that He would forgive and restore her, but her sin would not be without consequences. She would be healed and restored, but she would undergo a brief period of punishment.

The Lord explained that if Miriam's father had spit in her face, she would be required to leave the camp for seven days. This was not based on a specific statute from the Mosaic Law, but to be spat upon was to suffer contempt (cf. Deut. 25:9) and to be made ceremonially unclean (cf. Lev. 15:8).

Miriam's offense called for more shame than that, yet God was willing to treat her graciously. She could have

been sentenced to permanent banishment, but He limited her exile from the camp to just seven days.

Shutting her out of the camp for seven days was consistent with the Law's required purification process of restoring to the community at large those who naturally contracted such a disease (cf. Lev. 14:1-9).

Restoration of Miriam (Num. 12:15-16). The passage concludes by acknowledging that Miriam did indeed remain outside the camp for the next seven days. At the end of this time of waiting, she was received back among her people—fully restored, yet with an indelible reminder of the power of God and the evil of jealousy.

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

QUESTIONS

1. What reason does the text give initially for Miriam and Aaron's resentment of Moses?
2. What was the real reason behind their resentment?
3. What did God do immediately in response to Miriam and Aaron's words against Moses?
4. How did the Lord show His presence to Aaron, Miriam, and Moses?
5. How did God say He typically spoke with prophets?
6. How did God say He spoke with Moses?
7. In what way did God punish Miriam?
8. How did Aaron respond when he saw Miriam with leprosy?
9. How did God answer Moses' prayer on behalf of Miriam?
10. How was God gracious to Miriam even in her judgment?

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. When we feel the need to rebuke someone, we should consider whether our feelings are sinful or justified according to God's Word (Num. 12:1).
2. We should always be meek in considering our roles in the family of God, not asserting authority where we have none (vss. 2-3).
3. God's justice is sure, so we can have peace when we are falsely accused or defamed (vss. 4-5).
4. In Christ, we can have intimacy with God and should seek a close relationship with Him (vss. 6-8).
5. Do not provoke the Lord; He will chastise His children (vss. 9-10).
6. Even after we repent, sin still often has consequences (vss. 11-16).

—Megan Hickman.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Are you critical of others (cf. Matt. 7:1-5)? How can you discern whether it is appropriate for you to rebuke another believer?
2. What does it mean to be meek? How do some people misunderstand this?
3. Do you have a hard time having faith in the timing of God's judgments?
4. Do you think people still receive immediate punishment for sins today? In what ways? Does it always happen this way?
5. How can church discipline lead to reconciliation? How could it be more damaging to ignore sin than to deal with it?

—Megan Hickman.

Golden Text Illuminated

"If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream" (Numbers 12:6).

In our golden text for this week, Moses' woes in governing the Israelites continue. This time the trouble comes from members of his own family.

Apparently they were offended that Moses had taken another wife.

Aaron and Miriam's irritation about Moses' remarriage provided them an occasion to attempt to undermine his authority over the people.

But our text tells us that the Lord was having none of it! He immediately summoned the three of them to appear before Him at the tabernacle.

Our golden text is the beginning of the Lord's verdict. He began by contrasting the way He usually communicated to His prophets with the special, intimate way he communicated with Moses. The Lord had never communicated with anyone as directly and personally as he did with Moses. Therefore, the Lord pointedly challenged them with the question, "Wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Num. 12:8).

This question must have chilled Aaron and Miriam to the bone, since it indicated the Lord's extreme displeasure with their actions against Moses. The pillar of the Lord's glory suddenly departed from the tabernacle, leaving Miriam covered in white, leprous sores.

Moses interceded for his sister's healing, but the Lord insisted that she be shut out of the camp for seven days.

—John Lody.